

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## AFRICAN LITERATURE

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**Overview** Egyptian literature is abundant, during five millennia B.C.E: short stories and lyrics reach high levels of expressive beauty, reflecting the life of the common man, the life and adventures of the soul after death, and the joys of young love. The material composing the literature of Africa, for the following millennium, attracts us with little that is available to us--obscure language, obscure texts--and if we leave aside the vast riches (most of them still untranslated for the West,) of Timbuktu's 16<sup>th</sup> century libraries--our first real personal touchdown may be with the tale of the life of Olaudah Equiano, 1789. From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. we are in increasingly rich territory as we approach the abrasive and deepening waters of cultural contact and conflict--Colonialism, the shock of independence, and latterly the attempts to come to grip with a world both neo-colonial and rich with new possibilities.

**Ancient** Ancient Egyptian written literature flourished in many genres, from lyric poetry, much of it composed in the last centuries B.C.E., through dignified religious hymns, to religious narratives charting the course of the soul after death, to charming and profound stories, like 'The Story of Sinuhe,' which probe the dilemmas of the human condition. Though we have little to imagine from, we know that the Egyptian traditions in art persisted through Coptic culture into that of Ethiopia, and that in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., significant literature--*The Book of Kings, the Kebra Negast*--was being created there in the Ge'ez language.

**Mediaeval** The great yet incompletely explored trove, of mediaeval African literature, probably lies in the many still untranslated manuscripts in the great libraries of Timbuktu, in the Malian Empire. What we have before us there, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, leads us to realize that we have manuscripts in poetry and philosophy which, though gradually being brought to scholarly light, are still only a half-glimpse of mediaeval Arabic brilliance. What we do possess in full brilliance, though itself in many versions--both scholarly and creative--is the epic of *Sundiata*, ruler of Mali from 1235-55, -preserved by griots, thus oral, but long and now skillfully translated into prose narrative--and part, thus, of African prose reading experience.

**Pre-Colonial** A milestone text, for this period in which Africa is only gradually entering the literary mainstream, is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 1789, written by a freed slave who--born either in Nigeria or South Carolina--passed his life in Britain, where he played an active role in the abolitionist movement.

**Colonial** With the scrambling intervention of European cultures into Africa, a movement taking speed in the eighties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the dominance of oral culture diminishes on the continent of Africa. (The world of bureaucracy, public notices, and organized writing-based education asserts itself where orality had formerly ruled, with its older versions of the place of memory and social clock time.) At this point we note what is called the first African novel in English, Joseph Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911). In 1935 we meet what is called the first African play in English, by the South African Ernest Dhlomo, and already by 1958 we are able to watch major theater, still under Colonialism--Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The Black Hermit* (1958). If we nod even briefly to the French Colonial world we come on the manifestos and poetry exploding from the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre de langue française*, edited by Leopold Senghor in 1977, post independence but chock full of the powerful poetry of Black African (and pan African) fury which had been building throughout Africa during the fretful colonial years of French occupation.

**Post Colonial** With the withdrawal of the major European administrative structures from Africa--first from Ghana (1957) and then country by country in short order--African writers see themselves faced with the challenges fiction batters on: how to map the way ahead, in societies still largely traditional; how to deal with the competing claims of English (or other European languages) with native languages; or how to convert tribal into even the semblance of democratic institutions. Meeting such challenges inspired in the Black African novelist, often while using 'techniques' reminiscent from traditional oral literature, a flood of new and fresh fictions, and anthologies--worth of poetry which was new because it was traditional.

**The modern African novel** .. The African novel, like the African cinema, has made the twentieth century its own, with inventive forward moves on all parts of the continent. One need only reflect on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall*

*Apart* (1958) to see how ready the African creator was to step into a new role, in which Colonialism was a condition to reflect on, instead of simply to put up with. Okonkwo, the main character in Achebe's novel, is a sensitive but vain man, who is driven into exile, from which he returns to find a topsy turvy world in which the Europeans have established 'colonial practices' in his Igbo hometown. Okonkwo is aghast at this change, and particularly at the compliance with which his former fellow citizens accept this change. Suicide is his astonished response. At such depth does the new African novel make space in itself for fresh visions: already in 1952 Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* had explored the hallucinatory dimensions of myth and oral awareness in the 'modern African'; Florence Nwapa, in *Efuru* (1966), had explored the deeply African issues around barrenness, which leaves a woman outside the entire continental value system, for which reproduction is the key sign of harmony with the world; in *Fragments* (1970), Ayi Kwei Amah writes the story of a privileged Ghanaian named Baako, who returns home a been-to, caught between two worlds, and is finally exposed to the deepest levels of his broken self, under the interrogations of his blind grandmother, who is directly in touch with the ancestors; while the young Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in *Americanah* (2013) knocked our socks off verbally, with an inwardly sassy tale that goes in pure language to the whole issue of being Nigerian, or, let's say, of not being American.

### Reading

Busby, Margaret (ed.), *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptian to the Present*, New York, 1990,

Gikandi, Simon (ed.), *Encyclopedia of African Literature*, London, 2003.

Gordon, April A. and Gordon, Donald L., *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, London: 1996.

Irele, Abiola, and Simon Gikandi (eds), *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 2004.

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Shamim, Amna. *Gynocentric Contours of the Male Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, New Delhi, 2017

Werku, Daniachew, *The Thirteenth Sun*, Trenton, 1968.

### Discussion questions

Is there a continuity in the historical development of African literature, or is that literature too diverse and fractured to allow continuity?

We have limited this entry to written literature. Can the written-oral distinction always be made? What about the epic of *Sundiata*, which was composed and kept alive by griots, but has lived on through a brilliant prose translation into French?

How do you explain the particular effervescence of both the novel and the cinema in 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa? Is there a poetic-narrative openness in these genres, which fits the African expressive need?

Was Colonialism of some value to the African creative spirit? How would you deal with this question?

A number of non-black African writers --Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, J.M.Coetzee--have added greatly to the fictional creativity of the African novel. Should these writers be considered 'African writers' or something else?,

Traditional oral poetic techniques--flashbacks, confluences of past and future, stylization of the authorial role--have been influential in the modern African novel. Can you investigate this cross over from poetry into prose fiction?